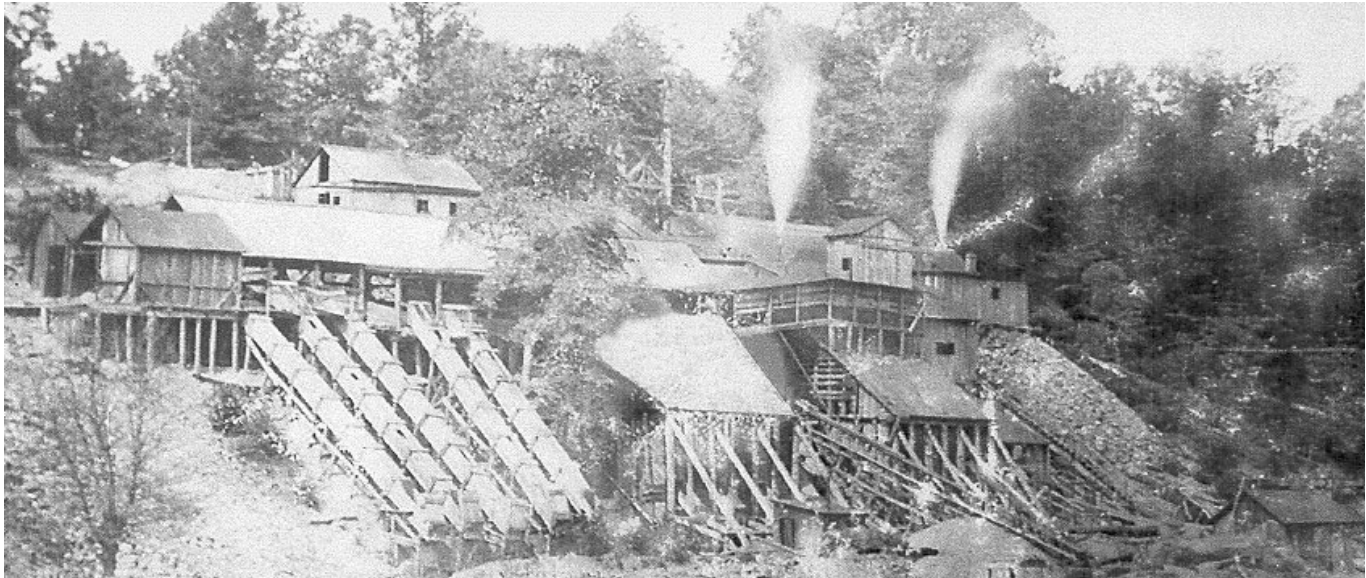




## The Cabin Branch Pyrite Mine



Old pit head, mill, and ore bins, 1919 (Park Archives)

### Industry on the Quantico Creek

Today, the Pyrite Mine trail leads you to a peaceful, open expanse above the banks of the Quantico Creek. However, from 1889 to 1920 the area you view from the boardwalk was busy with the sights, sounds, and smells of mining. The Cabin Branch Pyrite Mine employed residents of the villages of Batestown and Hickory Ridge, and the ‘fool’s gold’ that miners brought to the surface was processed into sulfuric acid and used in making soap, fertilizer, and gunpowder. During the years it operated, the Cabin Branch mine supplied more than 200,000 long tons (a long ton is 2,400 pounds) of pyrite for industry in the United States.

### Why Mine Pyrite?

The soils of Virginia contain many important minerals and ores, including iron sulfite, or pyrite (FeS<sub>2</sub>). Sometimes called ‘fool’s gold’ for its gold-like luster, pyrite is a very common mineral, found in such places as Spain, Peru, Russia, South Africa, and the United States. The name “pyrite” comes from a Greek term, *pyrites lithos*, “stone which strikes fire.”

Sulfur, the source of sulfuric acid, was an important industrial mineral at the turn of the twentieth century, with the United States its heaviest importer. Through advances in chemistry, sulfur became an important part of making paper, vulcanized rubber,

medicines, and explosives. Pyrite provided the most cost-efficient source of sulfur. It was “roasted” to extract sulfuric acid, which was then used in many applications. Later technologies also enabled industry to recover sulfur from oil and natural gas. Pyrite was strategically important; while the U.S. military fought in the First World War (1917-1918), miners at the Cabin Branch mine were exempted from military conscription. The price of pyrite rose and fell with demand, from \$4.64 per long ton in 1916 to \$15.75 per long ton in 1917, before falling at war’s end.

### Bringing Pyrite to the Surface

The toil of miners fed industrial hunger for pyrite and sulfuric acid. At the peak of operations at the Cabin Branch mine in the 1910s, between 200 and 300 men worked for the Cabin Branch Mining Company or its 1916 successor, the American Agricultural Chemical Company.

Miners reached the ore through shafts dug from the surface to the rock face more than 1,000 feet below. They found pyrite in bands that were 14 to 18 feet thick. At the Cabin Branch mine, miners did not use picks to extract ore. Instead, they used

dynamite. Miners worked in crews consisting of a driller, who bored holes for dynamite; a powderman, who carried and set the dynamite; muckers, who loaded ore into wagons; and timbermen, who built wooden supports for the mine roof. Blasters supervised the process and were paid by the distance progressed per day. Wagons took the ore to the shaft, where it was loaded onto a “skip” and brought to the surface. It was then crushed, sorted by size, and taken by a narrow-gauge railroad to barges on the Potomac.

### Working in the Depths of the Earth

Mining pyrite was dark, dirty, and dangerous. Miners labored in two or three shifts a day for six days a week, with only the light from lamps on their heads to guide their work. Shifts were usually ten hours long, and miners might only see the sun on Sundays. They ate lunch underground. Miners had to be alert while working with dynamite and other dangerous substances. “Lots of people got killed in there,” remembered locomotive engineer John Kendell in 1973. Kendell was seriously injured when one of the narrow-gauge trains that hauled pyrite ore to the Potomac River derailed in an accident that may have been racially motivated. He became a night watchman after his recovery. Miners’ children also worked; they were paid 50 cents per day to sort crushed pyrite ore into piles by size.

Pyrite miners’ incomes varied, ranging from \$3.50 to \$4.25 per day in 1920. In addition to facing low wages, miners received some of their pay in the form of scrip – coupons valid only to purchase products at inflated prices in the company store. That year, miners went on strike – or threatened to strike – for a wage increase of 50 cents per day. The mine superintendent refused to increase wages and closed the mine instead.

Hickory Ridge and  
Batestown: Supporting  
the Mine

Mine employees did not suffer long commutes to work. Most lived close to the mine in the communities of Batestown and Hickory Ridge. While African-Americans and whites both worked in the Cabin Branch mine, it was a segregated place of employment.

The village of Batestown, on today’s Mine Road, was an African-American community, established near where a family of freed slaves bought land and settled. Hickory Ridge was a nearby community of whites and blacks that developed with the Cabin Branch mine. Residents in both communities relied on water from streams or wells and did not have

indoor plumbing or electricity.

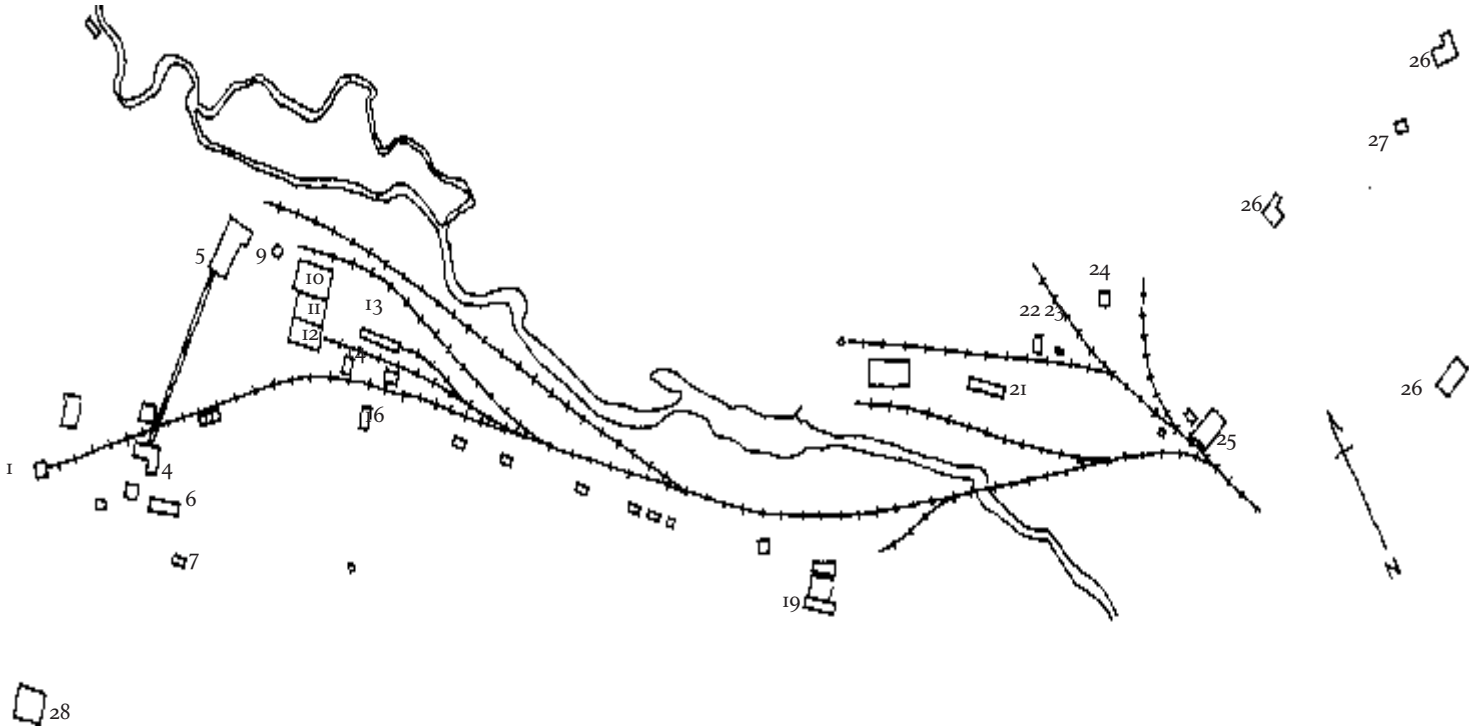
Between 1889 and 1920, many of the men in Batestown and Hickory Ridge worked in the mine. After the mine closed, some local residents moved to Pennsylvania to work in its coal mines, while others stayed, continued to work their small farms, and found jobs in the Cabin Branch area for the local railroad or at nearby shipyards and military bases. Most properties in Hickory Ridge became part of Prince William Forest Park, while Batestown lives on along Mine Road.

Prince William Forest  
Park and Reclaiming the  
Pyrite Mine Site

After its closure in 1920, the Cabin Branch mine lay dormant. By the 1930s, many of its 70 buildings were gone. Local residents or Civilian Conservation Corps enrollees recycled building materials in their own homes or camps. Mine waste became a base for park roads. Although the mine no longer operated, sulfuric acid and metal sulfates from waste piles leached into the soil and the Quantico Creek, keeping all but the hardiest species from growing and making the water as acidic as vinegar.

In 1995, the National Park Service and the state of Virginia reclaimed the mine. New channels diverted surface water from disturbed areas. Waste piles were mixed with lime to reduce their acidity and moved. Mineshafts were excavated to a depth of 20 feet and capped with concrete seals. Clean soil was added, and over 5,000 trees and shrubs were planted to encourage the reestablishment of a hardwood forest. Today, the part of the Quantico Creek flowing by the Cabin Branch mine is much cleaner and safer, protecting the park’s resources.

The Cabin Branch Pyrite  
Mine Historic District,  
c. 1919



*The area of the Cabin Branch Pyrite Mine is listed in the National Register of Historic Places. It is illegal to disturb the remains of buildings or to remove artifacts. Please contact a Park Ranger at 703 221 7181 if you have any questions.*

Map Key:

- 1: Main Mineshaft
- 2: Change House
- 3: Hoisting Engine
- 4: Crusher House
- 5: Mill
- 6: Blacksmith Shop
- 7: Carpentry Shop
- 8: Ore Bins
- 9: Water Tower
- 10: Boiler Room
- 11: Engine Room
- 12: Machine Shop
- 13: Locomotive Shed
- 14: Warehouse

- 15: Oil Shed
- 16: Office
- 17: Workers’ Quarters
- 18: Old Shaft
- 19: Old Ore Bins/Mill/Pit Head
- 20: Old Machine Shop
- 21: Sawmill
- 22: Freight House
- 23: Oil House
- 24: Store
- 25: Commissary
- 26: Houses
- 27: Icehouse
- 28: Reservoir
- 29: Pump House